



CROSSING THE WATER: INTERPRETATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath was a prolific writer both in her choice of themes, language and imagery. Most of the times she has been labelled as a 'confessional' poet based on reading of a few of her poems-specifically *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*. A gamut of discussion has already been undertaken by critics and research scholars on the events in the life of this poet-her brilliance, her loss of her father at an early age, her numerous suicide attempts, her desire to fit in and her crumbling down of her marriage to the poet Ted Hughes leading to her untimely and gruesomedeath. However her unique language and imagery, effervescence of emotions refute all traditional concepts and point to the fact that these are outpourings of a brilliant mind in work. It is a transgression of stereotypical ideas and images, it is a reawakening of the unparalleled genius that she was and an appropriation of the new space thus created. The collection titled *Crossing the Water* comprises lesser known poems of Sylvia Plath yet the term 'crossing' holds great significance in context of the plethora of thoughts pervading the amalgamation. The sub-title mentions these as 'transitional' poems. These are poems composed over a couple of years and each poem is unique in its clairvoyance and marks a 'moving over'. Analyzing the poems in the light of various perspectives the paper would endeavor to clear out the cobwebs in the dark corridors of this relatively less discussed collection.

Key Words: Perspective, Language, Imagery, Self, Other

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INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath's most powerful mode of expression was the lyric poem in which a subjective speaker is already assumed. Post-war American poetry explicitly addresses the abyss of the self and is a litany of loss, hate and sorrow. The problem of the 'self' and not the 'other' is addressed by its arrival at speech directly through the imagery it uses. However, Plath with her unique poetic voice

entices the reader to look for the 'other'-the hidden self while at the same time addressing it outwards through interpretable imagery. Plath's works point to the fact that she had immense belief in the limitless capacities of language. Adrienne Rich's argument for a female language is echoed in Plath. Helen McNeil writes- "Adrienne Rich.....has argued that since social discourse has been taken by men for their own use, women must invent their own

'common language'. Although Rich like Plath, began her career with formal impersonal lyrics, she has subsequently loosened her poetic form while seeking to develop a recognizably female language" (McNeil, 477). Plath's use of landscape and seascapes is indeed one of the most characteristic features of her poetry. More so in her collection of poems *Crossing the Water*. They put their mark on a considerable part of her work and appear throughout her career, linked as they are to her experiences as a woman and as a poet. Plath sought inspiration and raw material for her poetry in different settings. Her poems serve as mirrors for a self in search of identity and truth. Sylvia Plath follows a pattern of poetic self-discovery, yet her basic form of expression remains the lyric. This collection of poems *Crossing the Water* by Sylvia Plath is understated in its appeal but contains a wealth of unexplored ideas and critical interpretations.

GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

The 'immigrant psyche' of Plath has been revealed through her various poems. We would further elucidate the point along with its subtle yet firm connection with the title and would try to establish that in this paper. The geographical angle would tantamount to the fact that Plath visited numerous places i.e. a physical 'crossing' over many countries resulted in a number of poems. *Ouija* (1957) and *Black Rook in Rainy Weather* (1956) were the wholehearted attempts of a student during her stay in Cambridge in June, 1957. Yaddo, in 1959 yielded *Who, Dark House, Maenad, The Beast* and *Witch Burning*. The fruit of this same period also included *Two Campers in Cloud Country*. (1960). The travel theme is embedded in this poem commenting on their stay at Rock Lake, Ontario for two or three days' fishing. The gargantuan land mass of North America with its breathtaking extremes of scenery and climate, the wide expanse of skies was a source of *Ariel* poems. She says in this poem, that after a three days' driving, they found-----

".....a cloud

The polite skies over Boston couldn't possibly accommodate

Here on the last frontier of the big, brash spirit

The horizons are too far off....." (Plath, 127)

She has transcended the claustrophobic ambience of Boston and 'crossed 'over to a freedom where "night arrives in one gigantic step" (Plath, 127) *Sleep in the Mojave Desert* (1960) describes their crossing the Mojave Desert from Pasadena. Her impressions are presented in crystallized brilliance and America's huge, uncanny spaces once again become the origin of surrealistic landscapes. This physical 'crossing' over also contributes to a change of style---no longer a pastiche of Roethke but more deliberate and sharp-edged and her very own.

"It is dry, dry

And the air dangerous. Noonday acts queerly

On the mind's eye, erecting a line

Of poplars in the middle distance, the only

Object beside the mad, straight road

One can remember men and houses by" (Plath, 126)

After a visit to the Dordogne, she and Ted bought a house in a small town in Devon and moved there in September, 1961. *Wuthering Heights, Finisterre, Blackberrying, The Surgeon at 2 A.M.* are reflections of the change of domicile. *Blackberrying* originally took place on a stretch of North Devon coastline and the lanes last "hook" reveals nothing but the cliff face.

Thus Sylvia Plath's poems testify to the fact that her surroundings helped her to transact a 'lived space', not the physical space. She absorbed her surroundings and the assimilation finds voice in her poems thereby contributing to the real 'I'.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Plath's poems and her name has become a modern totem-the protagonist of the psychological dramas which her poems and other works are thought to chronicle. Plath's works have a double dynamic which arises from the revealed and the repressed speaking at the same time. Psychoanalysis deals with motives or reasons, especially disguised or hidden which helps to clarify literature on two levels---the level of the writing itself and the level of character action within the text. It also helps to examine the articulation of our most private anxieties and meanings to culture and gives us a

perspective on them as cultural formations. So *Parliament Hill Fields* (1961) an elegy for her lost baby; perhaps, too, for her lost “perfect” (Stevenson, 89) marriage is suffused with images of the landscape of Parliament Hill Fields in London. Plath herself comments—“.....seen by a person overwhelmed by an emotion so powerful as to color and distort the scenery” (Plath, 4). The poem gives the poet the comfort of knowing that her older child is safe at home though she has faced the pangs of miscarriage. The imagery thus moves (‘crosses’) over from blankness and silence to one which proclaims that there is still scope of vitality and zeal from her surviving world.

“On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.

Faceless and pale as china

The round sky goes on minding its business.

Your absence is inconspicuous;

Nobody can tell what I lack.

.....The moon’s crook whitens,

Thin as the skin seaming a scar.

Now, on the nursery wall,

The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill
In your sister’s birthday picture start to glow. (Plath, 134)

.....”

An aura of depression pervades *Small Hours* (1961) portrayed through sleepless nights and an imagery of birth and miscarriage which graduates (‘crosses’) to images of effacement and the personified moon. *The Surgeon at 2A.M.* (1961) is about “the night thoughts of a tired surgeon”, (Plath, 166) but for him the hospital ward is a ghastly garden of bodies through which he strolls like God. Tubers and fruits ooze their ‘jammy substances’. Plastic body parts replace dead tissues swimming in vinegar like ‘pathological salami’. At the end he strides off in triumph, developing (‘crossing’) into a hero, a true savior.

“Grey faces shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers”. (Plath, 166)

In *Maenad* (1959) she undergoes a shamanistic transformation and rejects the Dark Mother-‘crossing’ over to a different persona-

“Mother, keep out of my barnyard

I am becoming another”. (Plath, 119)

In Plath’s madhouse the father once the source of all wisdom, has betrayed her; he ‘shrank to a doll’ while she grew ‘too big to go backward’ thus unable to ‘cross’ over into childhood, when she “sat by my father’s bean tree/ Eating the fingers of wisdom” (Plath, 119). So *Dark House*, *Maenad*, *The Beast* are poems of nightmarish regression which she wrote from her own experience. Lacan says that language is always about loss or absence; we only need words when the objects we want is gone. It can thus be safely concluded that Plath’s creativity can be relegated to the fact that certain absences in her life do vouchsafe for the ‘crossing’ over to language as a means of expressing the void in her not-so-full world. She relives the realm of the Real when she enters language as a means of expression, though Real is irretrievably lost as it is not representable in language.

METAPHORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Plath’s poems are suffused with an abundance of metaphors. She glorifies in linking disparate images with panache. Intellectually-stirring conceits are not her forte. In a startlingly refreshing poem *Metaphors* (1959) the poet herself becomes a ‘riddle’ in nine syllables.

“I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.”
(Plath, 102)

Crossing the Water (1962)-the poem from which the collection derives its name concludes with the image of ‘expressionless sirens’ which marks the passage across Lethe like-

“This is the silence of astounded souls.”
(Plath, 190)

It is a brilliantly executed image examined for bringing forth of potentialities already present in the initial image. It is a kind of extended metaphor which testifies to the fact that the Plath poem is always the work of a voice. In this particular case the

voice yields knowledge too. The poem does not gain a narratively or rhetorically induced 'conclusion'; it just continues the image and displays a particular type of self-knowledge. This self-knowledge shows the transition of one self into the other. Plath shakes hand with her doppelganger not merely through symbol hunting but satiating the "psychic necessity" (Stevenson, 63)

"Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.

Where do the black trees go that drink here?

Their shadows must cover Canada.

A little light is filtering from the water flowers.

Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:

They are round and flat and full of dark advice.

Cold worlds shake from the oar.

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;
Stars open among the lilies.

Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?

This is the silence of astounded souls."
(Plath, 190)

CONCLUSION

This particular set of poems establishes certain unexplored facets of the genius called Sylvia Plath as viewed from various perspectives. It can be rightly concluded that her apparent indiscrepancies appeared as "madness" (Stevenson, 103) but as Emily Dickinson said-

"Much Madness is divinest Sense-

To a discerning Eye....."
(Dickinson, 435)

Sylvia Plath was an extraordinary poet and she had at her command an extraordinary set of highly diverse materials which she juxtaposed into poems of striking originality. Even though we may not be able to reach into the obscurest crevices of her imagery and thought, the poems she wrote may help us to clear the ground for entering deeper into her poetic world. In the conception and

implementation of her imagery, in the novelty of her expressions and comparisons, and in the unpredictability and innovative use of her varied creations she remains unparalleled.

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